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ABSTRACT

Students should be encouraged and taught how to write more effectively. This may be accomplished by involving them in two types of writing--the journal and the essay. The student is encouraged to record in his journal what he did and thought during the day, regardless of the trivialities. The journal is never evaluated by the instructor unless the student specifically requests it, but it is used later in writing the essays. The instructor works closely with the student during the initial stage to help him decide on a thesis statement that he can develop with specific examples and evidence. To avoid spending too much time in pointing out mechanical errors in the final draft, the teacher calls attention to these problems during the early writing stages. Style is more important in the final writing. The student submits the final draft along with a cassette tape to enable the instructor to record his reaction to the essay. (SW)

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INDIVIDUALIZING THE COMPOSITION CLASS

J. Kenneth Sieben

If your situation is anything like mine, you are expected to teach the skills of written composition to an inordinately large number of beginning college students, 75% of whom cannot read at a 9th grade level and cannot produce grammatical sentences with any degree of regularity. And if you're anything like me, you threw out your freshman reader and handbook a long time ago, because your students could neither read the reader nor handle the handbook. And since then you've been faced with the task of figuring out for yourself how to teach them to write.

Today I'd like to share with you an approach that I've been experimenting with for the past year. I might, of course, throw this one out too, along with many other approaches I've tried over the past 14 years, but for the present, at least, I'm satisfied that the idea has some merit.

In my composition classes I require two different kinds of writing—the journal and the essay. Each student must keep a journal, in which he records what he did and/or what he thought about that day in an entry of at least 100 words. The journal serves as a storehouse of ideas and experiences from which he selects the subjects for his essays. During the semester each student must write three essays of 1000 to 1500 words. In these essays, the student tries to explain how he feels about some subject, and he often tries to persuade his reader that his feelings are the correct ones to maintain. A student may, if

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he wishes, substitute for one of his three essays a paper required for another course, provided he submits it to me first at least a week before it is due in the other course.

The journal is neither corrected nor evaluated in any way, unless, of course, the student asks for some kind of comment by me--and most students will ask for evaluation, I have found. I check, fairly frequently, to make certain that they are maintaining their journals up to date, but I don't go beyond a mere check unless invited.

The real meat of the course is the essay, and the student can pretty much work at his own pace in putting his essays together. I don't usually impose any date, although if I see that a number of students have not yet completed their first essay and we're nearing the end of a third of the term, I will point out that they'd better get a move on.

I insist on having each student work closely with me in the planning stage. First I ask him what he wants to write about. Then I ask him who he's planning to address himself to; this question often stymies him for a time. Once we've established an audience for his topic, I ask him what he wants to tell that audience about that topic. What we're doing here, of course, is writing a thesis sentence, although I hesitate to use such a dirty word until everyone has completed at least one of his essays. With the thesis sentence before us, I ask him what he thinks he will have to explain to convince his audience that the thesis is a valid one; in other words, what background, examples, evidence, etc., he will need to present in the body of the essay. (Some people call this building an outline.)

All this may take 5 minutes, or it may take three or four 15-minute sessions. But, regardless of how long it takes, the student now has taken care of his content and organization, so he needs to be concerned with only mechanics and style. And, I should point out here, since he's written the key words he's going to use in the essay a couple of times already, I've had the chance to point out to him any spelling errors.

The student is now ready to write the first draft of his essay. And, let me assure you, I make it crystal clear from the beginning that an essay must be written through in its entirety several times before it can be considered polished. After all, I point out, I'm requiring only three essays, while the other teachers at this college require eight or ten; so don't tell me I'm overburdening you. And so I persuade, or perhaps force, him to write the essay with the full knowledge that he'll have to write it at least once more, and probably twice. Usually I'll review his first draft with him in about five or ten minutes, pointing out errors in sentence structure, agreement, punctuation, spelling, and any matters of mechanics that need attention. Since I don't grade it at this point, the student soon comes to understand that he's simply not going to be marked down for this kind of mistake. He can correct them all for his next draft, thus insuring that his essay will be evaluated for matters other than mechanics. And don't forget, he's already thought through his content and organized his presentation in the outline. What's left? Style. And so it is style that I ask him to work on in putting together the final draft. And when the student has actually seen that his second draft is noticeably better than his first,

he is often quite willing to try again, especially after I've shown him which sentences need attention. If all has gone well, he's into it heavy by now.

Eventually the student prepares his final draft. He submits with it a blank cassette tape, on which I record my final analysis and evaluation. I like to read the final draft at my leisure, in privacy, so that I can look at it more objectively than I read the first and second drafts. This evaluation is a reflection on, rather than a reaction to, the paper.

Now, you might ask, how much time does all this take? How many students do you have? When do you get to speak with them all? I think I can answer these questions best by inviting you to spend a day with me. Let's assume it's about half way through the term, so that class routine is pretty well established.

Twenty-eight students had been assigned by the registrar before I screamed. But two never showed up, one had to withdraw because of a change in job shift, another left to have a baby, two changed to other sections after I had explained the course requirements, and two have been chronically absent. So, for all practical purposes, I have twenty students in the section.

At five minutes to eight I enter the classroom and place on the lectern a stack of index cards numbered 1-10. I go to pick up my mail and return at 8 o'clock, noticing that five students have taken appointment cards, just like the butcher's line at the supermarket. First I return corrected papers to two other students and excuse them to the AV center where they can listen to my taped comments. Then, two others ask if they can go to the library to do some research on their topics, and I excuse them. With three absences this morning,

I need worry about only thirteen warm bodies. Then I take my place and call for #1.

She comes forward to show me a revised version of a thesis sentence that we had discussed at our last meeting. It looks okay now, so I tell her to try to put together an outline. (She and I have been through the outlining process once already, and I want to see if she can handle it herself this time.)

Number 2 has in his hands a C- paper I had returned to him yesterday. He insists that it represents his best effort, and he wants a higher grade. I try to explain why I gave his paper a C-, but since I had already explained it in detail on the tape that he's already listened to, I doubt if I'm very convincing. He'll probably sulk for a few days, and we may lose him entirely. It's now 8:12 as I call for #3.

She tells me she plans to do her next essay on the subject of mind control, because she and her husband recently completed a special two day course in how to make your mind control your body and your emotions. The course, she tells me, convinced her that most people exercise very little mental control and, as a result, are not as productive as they could be. I pretend to be skeptical, and, sensing my attitude, she quickly assures me that she isn't talking about memory tricks, or gimmicks of any kind, but simply clear thinking. I ask her if she has been able to apply the techniques she'd learned to her college situation, and she responds affirmatively, insisting that she now regards herself as a very capable student. My next question is whether she thinks anyone else could profit from the techniques she's learned, and she indicates a belief that virtually anyone of average intelligence could quickly learn how to

exercise much greater mental control. Then I ask her to write what she's just said down in one sentence, and this is what she writes: "The average college student could get more mileage out of his brain by practicing a few easily learned techniques." By this time, she's decided to address herself to college students, rather than to college professors (who, she recognizes, already believe that), and she leaves me, after five minutes, ready to work on her outline.

At 8:17 I call for #4. He has a first draft of an essay which I read quickly, discovering a frighteningly large number of sentence fragments--adjective and adverb clauses, strings of modifiers, appositives; you name it, he has at least one. I point out a fragment to him and explain what's wrong. Then I ask him to find another. He cannot, although I see four on the page. Now this disturbs me, because I've already spent several sessions with him on this very problem, and I doubt if I'm the first teacher to have done so. So I send him to the library where I have several programmed grammar books on reserve, and instruct him to study the lesson on fragments, then correct his paper and submit it the next time we meet.

Now for #5. It's 8:30. She also has a first draft which I read quickly, checking all the mechanical errors. Then I ask her to explain some of the rules to me. She sees her errors when they're pointed out to her, and she believes she can correct them, so I tell her to prepare a second draft for the next class. I also suggest an expansion for her introductory paragraph, because I don't want to have to spend too much time on this at our next meeting; her style needs a lot of attention, and I'd like to reserve the time for that.

The time is now 8:45--fifteen minutes left. The two students whose papers I returned earlier have returned from the AV Center. One tells me she understood my comments, but the other is not satisfied. I schedule an appointment with him for my office hour later in the day. Then I walk around the room for a periodic journal check. I stop at the desk of one student who has not yet started her second essay. "I can't think of anything to write about," she tells me. Her name is Maria, and she's from Puerto Rico, having come to Newark nine years ago right after high school. She's married and has three children. Maria works part-time as a waitress in a diner, where her husband is a full-time dishwasher. I read the last several entries in her journal, which all deal with her job. Apparently, she has had a couple of bad days--heavy on work and light on tips. One sentence, in particular, from yesterday's journal entry, grabs my attention: "People who don't leave a tip shouldn't eat in a restaurant." I ask her if she believes that everyone, always, under all circumstances, whould leave a tip for the waitress in a restaurant. Her answer is yes, an unqualified yes, regardless of how far I press her and how many examples of poor waitress service I cite. Obviously, she feels strongly about this issue, so I invite her to write her next essay on the subject of tipping. She accepts the challenge with something approaching interest, because she never before realized that one was "allowed" to write about anything like that for school.

Nine o'clock, and the class ends. On the way out, two more students turn in final drafts with their tapes, and #1 gives me the outline she had put together during class. I promise to return everything

at our next meeting.

So there you have a typical day. I usually get to see 4-5 students at their request, and 1-2 at mine. I may see 2-3 others during my office hours, and at least 1 will grab me in the elevator, the men's room, or Arnold's Bar across the street. A typical night's homework for me for each section is 2-3 essays (with tapes), 1-2 outlines, and perhaps 1 special thing I agreed to do, such as re-writing one paragraph of a paper to show a student how it could be organized better. During the time I am working with students individually, the rest of the class are at their desks working on their journals or some phase of an outline or an essay, or else in the library or AV Center. Or someone may be doing some kind of field research. One student, for example, had stated in an essay, "Most college girls today believe in sex before marriage." In my most professional manner, I told him that I wouldn't accept it on his say-so. He scoffed at my old-fashioned doubt and offered to bet me that at least 35 out of the first 50 girls he met that day would support him. So out into the halls he went in search of truth. That was six months ago, and I haven't seen him since. I can only assume that he has profited by the individualizing process.

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